



NURSERY RHYMES: THEIR SCOPE AND TREATMENT

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Poems for children could be defined with a slight change in the age-old formula, as a spontaneous overflow of tender feelings.

Rhythm, rhyme, tune and select words are the basis of this art. The first three qualities are of over-riding importance, because they constitute sound, and sound is what little children appreciate most. All the old nursery rhymes which have remained children's favourites for ages, display this. Just recite,

Old King Cole
Was a merry old soul,
And a merry old soul was he

and you will feel yourself floating on the melodious flow of sound. The meaning of words is secondary. Notice also that,

Old mother Hubbard
Went to a cupboard

Had her name not been what it was, she would not have bothered to go to a cupboard!

Some of the nonsense poems are more

popular with young children than poems which are good and carry a lot of sense in them.

Writing poetry is an inborn art, rather than acquired one. Human life starts with a song. If you listen to the cry of a new-born infant, you will catch a rhythm in it. It is as if the baby is announcing its arrival in its own sing-song manner. There is no doubt that poetry existed before man learnt to write. We see around us illiterate kids who love to sing. Children of aborigines also love to chant. The words or a song may not be understood but the sound of music is understood by everyone.

That poetry has a very ancient origin is clearly seen from folk songs, which were recited from generation to generation. They were never written down. But when printed books arrived and the reading habit spread, folk-lore remained restricted to rural areas. City people neglected them, replacing the old poems with newly composed ones. For some time, the idea grew that

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folk songs were the domain of the illiterate only, not of educated people. The latter had no need for it.

Such is not the case with children's poems. Nursery rhymes form an all-time need of children. The urge to sing, dance and mime is rooted in their nature. A young child is so restless, it will never remain still for a moment. Up and active, it would run rather than walk, and sing rather than speak.

Songs are thus an expression of the mobility or love of motion with which Nature has endowed the child world; and whoever wants to write for children, must take note of it. The poet must know that children's poems have to be rhythmical, simple, tuneful. Words should be chosen with great care and with perfect understanding of the age of the child for whom the poem is written; for the vocabulary differs with different age-groups.

Very small children—say, babies—hardly care for your words at all. They are frantically in love with sound. As for words, they often coin their own words which are more sonorous and sometimes even meaningful. For instance, instead of calling dog a dog they will call it *bhoo-bhoo* or *Bow-wow*, a cat will be *maiaow* and a sparrow a *chioo*. When the bird flies it goes *bhurr...* and so on. All their words have a close affinity with sound, and this must find a place in the composition of nursery rhymes.

I am tempted here to relate a little experiment which I made in my class. They were Kindergarten children, their years ranging from 3 to 5. The school was really over, but because it was raining heavily, I had to keep the children indoors. I could have kept them engaged by telling them a story; but they were so tired they did not seem to want it. I decided to turn the rough weather to my advantage. I just started repeating in a loud voice all the rumbling noise which the rain, the wind and the

storm were making—a sort of instant verisification with no words in it.

Gad gad gadak

Thad thad thadak

Dhad dhad dhadak The sound of clouds

Sar sar sarak

Thar thar tharak

Phar phar pharak The sound of wind

Tip tip tipak

Sip sip sipak

Tin tin tinak The sound of raindrops.

The whole class took the cue and started singing loudly, but at the same time, harmoniously. I could see from the way they were uttering the noise—phrases and gesticulating and dancing, that they could distinguish between the functions of the different sounds. It did not require any bookish words to tell which noise meant rain, which meant the clouds and so on.

It was a tremendous experience and a lesson for me in composing poems for children. Rhythm is ingrained in the daily beat of our life. Every poem has a music of its own, which has a magical effect on the senses and instincts of a child. Only the poet has to enter the child's mind to understand this.

However, lately, there has been such a plentiful crop of so-called nursery rhymes, that we must have a clear definition of their range and 'motif'. Lullabies sung to put a baby to sleep are not nursery rhymes; nor are many other poems which adulterate the little one's own qualities. These are poems *about* children and not *for* children. Children do not get involved in them. Phrases like 'cute', 'sweet' and 'my lamb' may tickle them momentarily as a parental pat on the back, but they do not really stir them up. A lullaby does not matter much anyway, because after all, the child listening to it goes to sleep! But as to this other type of poem, it hardly leaves a lasting impression on the young child.

Then there are the nostalgic poems. Children always wish to live in the present. They do not like to think of the past which constitutes a very small period of their lives. They indeed dream about the future. They do have an imagination, but fortunately, they do not waste it on such matters as the past.

As to the subjects of poems, the sky is the limit—from the cow in the shed to the moon in the sky. (Remember the nursery rhyme which bridges these two? . . . A cow jumped over the moon!) But whatever the subject, it must align itself with the children's world.

A child of the age-group of 1-3 years can understand the meaning of some words and is familiar with some activities. He is delighted when he hears of these happening in the lives of animals he is familiar with say, a dog or a cat or a sparrow.

"Sparrow, Sparrow, open the door!" is a famous traditional poem in Marathi which begins with a crow knocking at the door at the door of a sparrow. The sparrow does not want the crow to enter the house, so she gives an excuse:—"Wait till I bathe my baby!" The crow goes away but returns and knocks again. The process is repeated several times and every time the sparrow has ready excuse—"Wait till I powder my baby," "Wait till I dress my baby;" "Wait till I . . ." and so on.

The child, listening to this musical dialogue, puts himself in the place of the sparrow's baby and appreciates every step she is taking. Every event is imbibed in his memory in its proper order. Next time, you tell them to follow the same order. You miss a link or place it wrongly, she has not merely listened to it, but actually lived it.

The next age-groups are 3 to 5 years and 5 to 7 years. Children of the former age-group have learnt to speak. They like to pronounce certain words again and again. Their kinship with words has to be main-

tained in poems composed for them. This will not only give them a sense of achievement, but will also be the first step in helping to build a vocabulary.

Children of this age-group are curious about nature. They like to make acquaintance with animals and birds—not only the domestic ones but those which have so far been strangers to them. The cat speaks to them, the dog obeys them, the parrot listens to them. They even meet (in pictures if not actually in zoo's) the elephant, the camel, the tiger and the lion. They are not afraid of them. Just as they pull the dog's tail they would like to pull the tiger's whiskers (if we didn't stop them!) They talk to birds and animals. Making conversation with nature needs an extraordinary talent which we lose as we grow old. Most children possess this magic art. For example:

1. *"Where do you come from
You little drops of rain
Pitter—patter, Pitter patter
Down the window pane—*

—Ann Hawkshaw

2. *Pussy cat, Pussy cat
Where have you been?
I've been to London
To look at the Queen.*

—Christina Rossetti

Nature is vast and magnificent. It has a thousand facets. Any subject from Nature may be chosen, but the poet has to be careful about the treatment he gives it. He must be faithful to the way of life of birds and animals and not impose *all* human habits on them. For example, when a mother sparrow is out to find her missing baby, she would not go to the police, in the natural course. She might perhaps ask the mango tree, the butterflies, the ducklings, or other birds. If you send her to the police station, the child listener might nod his head because he is conversant with the process. But he will like it better if the

sparrow consults someone in her own natural world. If a sparrow builds a nest, she would not go to a builder for bricks and cement. She would ask the father sparrow to collect dried grass, sticks etc.

When we make animals talk and work, we are animating them. Animation is good, far-fetched humanisation is not. Nowadays, we come across nursery rhymes in which animals gather to hold elections, or have marriage ceremonies with rituals which are strictly human. Stretching imagination too far, is it not? Or does it show lack of imagination? Animals have habits of their own. Why not depict these?

Children know how their parents love them, how they help their neighbours and how warmly they receive their guests. They carry these sentiments to the animal world and imagine other creatures behaving like humans. This means that they animate them and impose human qualities on them. But they do not carry humanisation too far. They preserve a balance which many poets with their adult mind lack when they write animal poems for children.

Dolls are special favourites with all children. A girl would love her doll above everything else. She would look upon her as her baby and kiss and pamper her and also scold her for being naughty. In fact, she would treat her doll as her own mother would treat her. There are many poems about the doll in Marathi:

*Bhavle Bhavle tu ashi ga kashi?
Hat nahi dhuvit, dat nahi ghashit
Dudhachi phodtes peta bashi!
Bhavle, Bhavle tu ashi ga kashi?*

My doll is small, her shadow is tall,
Her face is nice. She looks with her
Twinkling eyes.

In this poem the girl mother rebukes her doll for being so naughty. . . "You don't wash your hands, or brush your teeth; you break the saucer and cup of milk. . ." and a number of other misdeeds.

It has already been pointed out that children are restless creatures—especially small children. If you ask a little boy or girl to stop being rowdy and squat on the floor for a few minutes with arms folded and eyes shut, they would do it for a minute, but they would be watching you through half-closed eyes and start fidgeting soon. They want action. They are always up and doing something. Give them action songs; they would enjoy them. Only every word in such songs must be carefully chosen. Every word must generate motion.

Supposing you compose something like this—

1. The princess was so fair
Long and soft was her hair
Her face was nice....

A nice face would not induce action. It could not become an action song. But suppose you say—

2. The young hunter
Went to hunt game
He held his gun
To take the aim . . .

Then . . . the young lad walks boldly, his head upright, his gun held firmly on his shoulder, then he sits down on his knees and aims the gun at some imaginary prey . . . All these actions follow quickly in those four lines. Such poems could make good action songs.

The next step for this age-group of 5 to 7 years is the informative poem—a poem which could impart some new knowledge to the child. This too is a delicate job; for we must not dole out lessons in teacher-like fashion, we must make it sound good.

Children of this age-group know that the sparrow nestles in the crevices of the roof, the owl lives in the hollow of a tree, the tiger lurks in the hill-side cave amidst the thorny bushes, and so on . . . Children would be tickled if this scanty knowledge which they possess about ani-

mals is put to the test. So I question them and draw answers from them. This too is a little experiment I actually made.

Question: Who is the one lurking on the hill-side in a thorny bush of berries?

Answers: (The children would naturally shout) — TIGER, TIGER! "Yes, you are right." I say,

"But how do you know he is hiding there?"

"Because he growls GURR, GURR, GUR."

"That's the way I want you to answer.

Again :

Question: Who is the one that hides in a hollow in a tree.

Answer: "GHOO, GHOO, GHOO, GHOO..."

The children have picked up the cue. They do not reply by naming the animals, they answer with sound, which method they immensely enjoy. In this little poem of mine, I have brought in cat, cuckoo, sparrow etc. and finally the child himself.

At a little programme in Goa where some five hundred kids had gathered, I tried this child-involvement game. The young listeners gave such a thunderous response that the whole pandal rang with animal cries. Even the grown-ups had joined in the question-and-answer fun. I had the satisfaction that the youngsters were not only getting merrier, they were also absorbing a wee bit of knowledge; they were identifying the different animals by their voices and also by the places where they dwell, hide or roam about.

I will recite a part of this poem in Marathi

Dongrachya ghalit

Karvandachya jalit

Laplay Kon? Laplay kon?

gur . . . gur . . . gur . . .

Zadachya dholit

Lakdachaya khalit

Laplay kon, laplay kon?

ghoo . . . ghoo . . . ghoo.

Ambayachya phandit

Pananchya sandit

gatay kon, gatay kon?

koohoo . . . koohoo . . . khoohoo

gharachya darat
phatitlya unhat
zoplay kon, zoplay kon?

Miaow . . . Miow . . . Miaow . . .
and so on . . .

While we deal with this age-group, there is another aspect which confronts us—the difference between the children of the cities and children from rural areas. It is argued that the way of living being entirely different in the two settings, the poems composed for them should also be of different types. This may be true to some extent. Village children would certainly enter quickly into the spirit of verses which have the farm, plough cattle and well etc., for their background and the city children would be at home with concrete buildings, local trains and crowded streets etc. But we must also have poems which will vividly show to a boy or girl in the village, how their fellow-children in the city live, the schools in which they learn, the games they play etc. So also the life and atmosphere in a village should be vividly presented to the city children. This would help to fill the communication gap and would be a first step towards national integration. Of course, while infusing educational value in the poems, we must make them dry and uninteresting. They must retain all the fascinating qualities of children's poetry—simplicity, rhythm, a lilting melody, and choice of metre and words to suit the particular age-group. This is absolutely necessary in all nursery rhymes.

As examples of poems which could help bring about an exchange of ideas between the rural and the city children, may I recite here two of my poems, the gist of which I will give in English. The first poem describes step by step how a sparrow builds her nest—a process, which being unknown to a city child, would delight him most. The second poem deals with the duties of a Fireman and his special privileges on a crowded street.

1. A pair of sparrows building their nest...
 Mother sparrow, Mother sparrow !
 What is it, Father Sparrow ?
 Look I have brought a pretty little pearl
 O that's fine, but where do we keep it?
 Not to worry,
 We will hurry
 And build a nest
 On the branch of a tree
 I will bring cotton
 I will bring grass
 I will bring feathers
 I bring straws
 We will put cotton
 nice and soft
 All over we will
 Spread the grass
 The border we will
 Line with straws
 And these feathers?
 See what I do!
 On the grass
 The feathers spread
 And keep our babes
 In a cosy bed
 What will they do ?
 They will Chirp Choo, Choo !
 Tender grass they will chew !
 'Chu Chiu' they will say
 With this pearl they will play
 In a grass bed,
 On cotton cushions
 Happily lie
 The little ones !

Marathi :

Chiutai chitutai
kay re chimnya?
Ha bagh aanlay motyacha dana
chhan ahe bai
Pan thevaycha khuthe
Tyat kay mothh? bandhu ya gharat
Chal tar lavkar
kam karu bharbhar
Zadachya phandivar
chotas karu ghar
Me aanato kapus
Me aanato pise

Me aanato gauat
Me aanato kadya
Aat ghalu kapus
Chhandar Maoo
Kadya gavat
Passarun devu
 gavatachya bhovati
Kadya rachu
Aani he pise ?
Aapan karu ase.
Chhandar ghartyat
Pillana theoo
 Pille kay kartil ?
Chiv chiv boltil
Chara khatil
Danyashi kheltil
Gavtachya gadit
Ni kapsachya ushit
Pitulli pille
Rahtil khushit !

In the second poem, an inquisitive boy asks and the fireman replies . . .

2. *Here Comes the Fireman !*
 Thunn—Thunn—Thunn . . .
 Here comes the Fireman . . .
 Where are you going mister ?
 I will tell you later
 Put on the cap and coat
 I will, as I go
 Take care do sit right
 I won't fall, I am sitting tight.
 Away . . Away . . Thunn Thunn . . Thunn
 The Fireman goes on
 Thunn-Thunn-Thunn
 You are on the wrong side
 O, we do not bother
 So many cars in the lane
 We won't stop for them !
 The traffic cop will make you stop
 None will dare to do that
 Away, Away Thunn-Thunn-Thunn
 Here comes the Fireman !

These stanzas are followed by some more in which an attempt is made to describe vividly the further actions of the fireman, such as the adjusting| hose, and spraying

water, putting up the ladder, spreading out the net, rescuing the distressed ones, facing the smoke and fire etc. Every time the boy puts a challenging question and the fireman replies:

Come what may

We will go our way

And after finishing his work,

he announces :

We have done our best

We now go and rest.

The following is the original in Marathi:

Bambwala chalalay than-an-an-

Bambwala chalalay tanan-an-an

Kuthe chalala sang rao

Aalyanantar sangto

Kot topi ghala rao

Jata jata ghatto

Neet aata basa rao

Ithun kay padto?

Oonch kase chadhal ho?

Shidi ughdun ghadicht

Paani kas udwal ho?

Nali sodun rabaracht

Dhoor khaun gud maral

Tyala nahi darnar!

Jaal lagun horpalal

Mage nahi hatnar

Kuthavar saar sosal ?

Kan puse karnar !

Door vha-Dior vha-tanan

Bambwala chalalay tan-tan-an

Lawli shidi

sodli nali

dharli jaali

Paani phekli phoos-phoos.

Aag vizali hoosh-hoosh

Sampla kaam

Aata aaram

Jato parat

Salaam - salam -

Tan-an-Tan-an Tanan . . .

Before ending my paper, let me state that I am not an educationist. Though I have studied Child Psychology for my Montessori Teacher's Diploma, I do not claim to be an expert in this science. But for nearly forty years now, I have been associated with children, observing and trying to understand them and making a few modest experiments. I have prepared this paper on the basis of the experience I have gathered and in which children have willingly helped me. I hope you will find it of some interest.

Great books do not have to preach. But they do speak to the conscience, the imagination, and a heart of many a child, and they speak with very clear and forceful voices.